

Title of poem: Five Senses

Performer's name: Paul Scott

Date of Performance: 19th September, 2009

Place of Performance: Arnolfini Bristol

Length: 02:48

Summary of Features

Anthropomorphism					
Blending					
Eyegaze					
Handshape					
Neologism					
Symmetry					
Use of space					

Notes:

Overview

This poem considers how the five senses contribute to the identity of a Deaf person. It shows how a Deaf person is not “lacking” in sensory experiences but just that the perception of the world is somewhat different. Each sense is animated so that it can explain to the poet/enquirer how it perceives the world. The senses of touch, taste and smell all work as one might expect for either a deaf or a hearing person, but when the poet-enquirer asks the fourth sense what it does, it is unable to reply. Only when the fifth sense, sight, is addressed, do we understand that the perception of the world is the result of the two senses working together.

Cognitive psychology theorises that our view of the world “embodied”. That is, it is mediated by the nature of our bodies so that our world “experience is [...] structured in part by the nature of the bodies we have” (Evans and Green, 2006, 45). Clearly, a Deaf person’s experience of the world will be different from that of a hearing person. Cognitive psychologists refer to this idea as “variable embodiment”. Cognitive linguistics has used these ideas to suggest that language is “embodied”, so that it reflects a person’s embodied understanding of the world. This poem shows how a Deaf person’s identity is built on his embodied view and it uses embodied sign language to show it. Thus we may say that the experience of the world is truly ‘embodied’ in a Deaf way.

This poem has been the subject of other commentaries, for example in *Images of Deaf Culture and Identity in Sign Language Poetry* that may be found at:

<http://www.editora-arara-azul.com.br/ebooks/catalogo/41.pdf>

It has also been considered in Chapter 13 of Sutton-Spence, R. (2005) *Analysing Sign Language Poetry*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Translation

This is called "Five Senses" ... I hope you can spot each sense

One sense refuses to explain itself

My five senses ... they are sleeping

"Excuse me"

The first sense stretches and yawns and looks up at me

"What sense are you?"

"What sense am I?"

"Yes, you"

"Wait, I'll show you"

The first sense sends a message down my arm and into my body

I feel something rising in my chest

I reach out to touch something, but OW!

I reach out with my other hand, but OW that's really cold!

I shiver and feel the hairs on my arms stand on end

The first sense looks up, smiling, "That's me!"

"Oh so that's who you are!"

The first sense goes back to sleep

"Excuse me"

The second sense stretches and yawns and looks up at me

"What is it?"

"What sense are you?"

"What sense am I?"

"Yes"

"Hmm, OK"

The second sense sends a message down my arm and into my body where I feel a

rising sensation in my chest
I take a big lick of an ice-cream
I tentatively put a tiny morsel of something in my mouth but YUK it tastes horrible!
I pop something in my mouth and mmm that tastes all right
I look back to my second sense who is smiling "That's me!"
"So that's who you are!"
The second sense goes back to sleep
"Excuse me"
The third sense wakes, stretches and yawns, "What is it?"
"What sense are you?"
"What sense am I?"
"Yes"
"OK"
The third sense sends a message down my arm and into my body
I inhale deeply the beautiful fragrance of a flower
I open the fridge door and OH what a terrible smell!
I take in the pleasant scent of a passerby
The third sense looks up at me smiling, "That's me!"
"Oh, so that's who you are. OK" and the third sense goes back to sleep
"Excuse me"
The fourth sense stretches and yawns and looks at me
"What sense are you?"
"Me? I can't say", the fourth sense bows its head sadly
What's going on? "Excuse me" I ask again
The fourth sense stretches and yawns, "WHAT!?"
"What sense are you?"
"I can't say" it replies, hanging its head sadly
Hmmm
"Excuse me"
The fifth sense stretches and yawns and looks up at me
"What's wrong with him?"
"OK, hold on, I'll explain"
So I wait, and wait
Suddenly, both senses pop up together, "We're together"

"It's the two of you?" "Yes, we're together"

How does that work?

Both senses send a message down my arm and into my body

My eyes spring open

I take in information, and colour, the world entering my brain through my eyes

"See? It's both of us together"

So there you are, and that's who I am

Anthropomorphism

The senses here are anthropomorphised using three different devices. Firstly, each is given the limited power of movement through use of an “upright” entity classifier that is normally reserved for humans. Each sense is allocated a finger that straightens to become the wakened sense and curls up as it goes to sleep once it has explained its character. Secondly, the sense is entirely personified as it is mapped entirely on to the human form of the poet so that it is given a facial expression, eyes and other characteristics and is able to sign using normal human hands. Thirdly it is allowed to inhabit the human body of the poet-enquirer so that it can demonstrate directly how the human body perceives the world through that specific sense.

Blending

Each time the new sense stands up from the closed fist, there is blending as the whole of the rest of the poet’s body takes on the “close-up” view of the personified sense, while the finger on the left hand shows the “long-shot” view of the same sense.

Eyegaze

Significantly, all the senses here use their eyes. When they wake up the finger straightens and the eyes open. The personified sense looks up at the questioner and when it has possessed his body, it uses his eyes to look at the world that it perceives (through touch, taste and smell). Most crucially this does not happen for the sense of hearing. It opens its eyes long enough to look at the questioner but then the eyes close, as the finger curls shut again. This is important, because the one sense that does not function as part of a deaf person’s identity is the one that cannot use its eyes (the main way a deaf person might build a deaf identity). When sight finally takes centre-stage the eyes no longer look at the objects the body interacts with, instead they gaze directly ahead in a non-focused way, as though taking in the whole visual perspective of the world.

In terms of gaze functions, the poet often takes on narrator’s role by constantly looking at the audience. This happens mainly when the questioner is interacting with the senses. Once he is possessed by the senses, the poet is entirely internal to the story and therefore he does not acknowledge the presence of the audience.

When the crucial sign of this poem (open 5 handshape with the ring finger and little finger sticking to each other) is introduced, the poet first looks at his own hand, and then shifts his gaze to the audience - highlighting the significance of this sign and then urging the audience to 'see' it.

Handshape

Two handshapes stand out in this poem because they are "illegal" in BSL.

The closed fist with the ring finger extended is not used in BSL (other sign languages, including Taiwan Sign Language, do use this handshape in some signs, but BSL does not). This is the handshape used for the attempted (and failed) conversation with Hearing. This means that there is important poetic meaning in using the one "non" handshape for the one "non" sense.

The final sign of the poem uses the common open 5 handshape but instead of the fingers being splayed equally apart, the ring finger and little finger are in contact. This is a highly intense, visual, manual summary of the embodied world experience of a Deaf person, but it only makes sense in the context of the poem. The meaning of this handshape has been built up through patterns that develop through the poem.

The handshape pattern of sequential fingers extending from the fist to sequential senses builds up expectations in the audience. After the first three instances, we expect that the fourth finger will behave as the first three have done. The delight in the poem comes when this pattern of expectation is challenged.

Neologism

This poem contains very few established signs. Almost every sign (apart from the sign WHAT?), at least at the start of the poem, could be seen as a neologism.

The use of the closed fist to represent the "potential" of all five senses is highly creative, as is the use of one finger extending from that fist to represent each individual personified sense.

Because the senses inhabit the poet's body, there are many creative signs that arise as a result of the 'transfer of person' from the sense onto the poet.

The sign used to refer to the scented flower is not the established BSL sign FLOWER. Previous performances of this poem have used the sign FLOWER which is far less visually motivated but the sign in this performance is perhaps more accessible to non-signers. It is not exactly specified, so it does not definitely mean FLOWER, and could mean anything cup-shaped that smells nice, but the context of knowing that it smells nice is enough for us to accept that it is a flower. The established sign FLOWER is one-handed and so cannot be symmetrical. The productive two-handed sign to refer to the flower is symmetrical. It also allows the possessed poet to engage actively in the act of smelling it, in a way that is less easy with the more obviously noun-like sign FLOWER.

Most of the signs in the last section of the poem are not productive but established. Using signs that are specific parts of vocabulary at this stage highlights the importance of vision to sign language, key to the central identity of a Deaf person.

As we saw in the section above, the final sign, using the 5 handshape with ring and little fingers in contact, is a neologism that only gets its meaning from the context of the poem. Because we have

seen the pattern of fingers for each sense developing through the poem, we know that merely displaying this handshape is a summary of the Deaf sensory experience.

Symmetry

There is a pleasant sense of balance in this poem, created through the clear use of left and right signing space. Symmetry is created in two different ways throughout the poem and the change in symmetry has important implications for the meaning of the poem. For the first three senses, balance is created either by each of the two hands signing in succession in the left and right sides of space or by both hands operating simultaneously in symmetrical signs. So, in Touch, the right hand reaches out leftward and then the left hand reaches out rightward to make a sequentially balanced sign, followed by a beautifully symmetrical simultaneous sign that could be glossed as GOOSE-BUMPS in which the left hand moves up the right arm, while the right hand moves up the left arm. In Taste the right hand takes something tasty from the right, the left hand takes something unpleasant-tasting from further left, and the right hand again takes something tasty from the right. In Smell the flower opens under the nose in a beautiful two-handed symmetrical sign, then the right hand shows the horrible smelly cheese, followed by the left hand showing the fragrant perfume of a person passing by. The symmetry is then broken entirely by the fourth sense (clearly meant to be Hearing) being unable to explain what it does. Symmetry is regained when Hearing and Sight work together to explain their experience. At this stage all the signs are simultaneous two-handed signs, creating a far stronger impression of symmetry than would be created by sequentially balanced signs: EYES-WIDE-OPEN, INFORMATION, COLOUR, WATCHING-MANY-THINGS-MOVING and, finally, LEARNING-THROUGH-THE-EYES. This extra-strong symmetry at this stage in the poem shows the comfort and value of using sight as a way of perceiving the world, when compared to the marked asymmetry when Hearing alone is unable to explain itself.

Use of Space

As we saw above in the discussion of symmetry, signs are carefully placed in the left and right sides of signing space to create a sense of balance. Additionally, the senses may be seen to be “off the body” or “in the body”. The senses they need to be external to the poet-enquirer to converse – then the poet is located on the right and the senses are located on the left, but when they carry out their explanation by directly showing what they do, they possess the signer’s body. This use of space allows us to understand that the senses, while in some way separate from the poet, are also part of the core of the poet’s identity.

Any Other Comment

References:

Evans, Vyvyan and Melanie Green 2006. Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press